



Vermont Department of Education  
CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS  
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## ESTABLISHING POLICIES REGARDING STUDENT SCHOOL FOOD SERVICE ACCOUNTS

Dealing with families that owe money to school food service programs are always awkward situations and raise many issues about the purpose of the school nutrition program, the management decisions that are being made, and the existence and implementation of school policies. To avoid embarrassing children, enraging parents, and driving the food service program into debt, your school should have clear policies regarding student accounts. These policies need to address:

- < Lost, Stolen or Strayed Tickets
- < Charging Meals
- < Past Due Accounts
- < Children Who Consistently Have No Lunch and No Money

### ***Federal Policy for Lost Tickets***

Federal policy focuses on procedures for dealing with free and reduced-price eligible students who have lost their tickets. School policies in this area must meet these specific criteria:

- < Parents must be notified in writing of the procedure.
- < Students must be allowed at least three ticket replacements during a school year.
- < Meals must always be provided to pre-primary and to young primary students as well as any handicapped students who may not be able to take full responsibility for a meal ticket.

The federal policy encourages schools to use the same procedures for dealing with missing paid tickets in the same manner as free and reduced price tickets to be sure that there is no overt identification of eligible students. A copy of the federal policy can be obtained by calling the Child Nutrition Programs office.

### ***Developing a Policy for Charging***

While there is no written federal policy for dealing with charges, their policy guidelines for lost and stolen tickets can be used as the basis for a local school policy. Schools also need to establish and publish clear guidelines for dealing with charges. In general, it is advisable to limit charges to a relatively small amount. Many schools use \$5 or 5 lunches as the limit. After that, the student can be required to bring cash in order to receive a meal. It is highly recommended that if a student comes to the lunch line with money, s/he is allowed to use that money to purchase a meal for that day instead of applying the money to the back due account and refusing the student a meal.



If after notification of a past due account the student's parent or guardian does not pay the bill, the school needs to make the consequences clear to the parent/guardian and do so in writing. It is best to treat this debt as any other money that is due to the school. Some schools withhold report cards until the money is paid.

When a student consistently comes to the lunch room without money and without a lunch, the food service manager should discuss the situation with the principal, guidance counselor, or school nurse. An application for free or reduced price meals might be sent to the family with a note encouraging the parents to complete and submit the application if finances are a problem.

### ***Basic Principles to Keep in Mind***

Dealing with meal charges, lost or forgotten tickets, and past due accounts are fundamental issues in managing a school food service program. Ideally, policies should be in place before the school year begins. Establishing and carrying out policies should be based on three important, basic principles:

- ◁ The goal of the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program is to serve the best possible meal to the most students possible. Every effort must be made to assure that students receive the meals they need.
- ◁ The provision of a meal can be looked at as a contractual relationship: the school agrees to provide meals to all students and not to discriminate in any way or to overtly identify students receiving free or reduced price meals. The student, in turn, has a responsibility to come to the food service line with the ticket or money or other "medium of exchange" that will allow the school to claim the meal for reimbursement and receive adequate payment.
- ◁ Policies and procedures work only when everyone understands them and they are applied consistently. Thus parents need to know in advance what payment process the school is using, what charging policies are, how bills will be handled, and what the consequences of non-payment are. School employees responsible for implementing the policies must also know what the rules are and follow through in implementing them consistently in all cases.

**To be effective, school policies regarding school meals should be:**

- **jointly developed by the school administration and food service manager**
- **publicized to students and parents, preferably at the beginning of the school year**
- **implemented consistently**